

Having their say

Young Palestinian writers from Gaza share their experiences and hopes through fictional stories in a new book called *Gaza Writes Back*.

Hello, world, are you listening? Editor Refaat Alareer says *Gaza Writes Back* is an important platform for the young Palestinian writers involved to share their message with the world outside their war-torn homeland.



THIS summer is the worst of all summers that passed without you; breathing some good air has become a luxury we cannot always afford. When nothingness takes over, which happens quite too often, I sit in my room, which is fully exposed to the sun, gazing at the tiny mark of a gunshot and the ugly crack it left there.”

This is a paragraph from the short story *L For Life* by young Palestinian Hanan Habashi. Habashi describes a fictional incident, how a girl loses her father when he is killed by a soldier who storms their house in Palestine’s Gaza Strip. The father is telling a bedtime story when he is killed, and his story comes to a cruel, abrupt halt. For many years after, the girl longs for her father to provide an ending to the story.

Habashi’s story is part of a compilation of short fiction by 15 young writers from Gaza. Entitled *Gaza Writes Back: Short Stories From Young Writers In Gaza, Palestine*, the book contains 23 stories in English written entirely from the perspective of young Palestinians who experienced the violence of the 2008/09 Operation Cast Lead led by Israeli forces “with the stated aim of suppressing rocket fire from Gaza into Israel” (Human Rights Watch).

Editor Refaat Alareer says it’s amazing how some writers like Habashi, who had never previously written anything in English and more so fiction, could come up with a story as powerful as *L For Life* (his favourite in the book).

“I knew I had to put the story as the first (of the collection) because it has a rawness that really hits you, considering how little confidence Hanan had when I first told her to write fiction,” says Alareer at a recent interview in Kuala Lumpur.

Habashi, now 24, was his student previously at the Islamic University of Gaza where Alareer has been teaching comparative literature and creative writing since 2007; he is currently doing his PhD in English Literature at Universiti Putra Malaysia.

Alareer says that he chose fiction as the format for the book because fictional stories have a timeless and universal appeal.

“Fiction narrates the human element more than news ‘stories’. Fictional stories can put names to the statistics of reported casualties. While articles are important to convey the story of the day, they fade into history with the passing of time and no one remembers what happened then.

“Also, though these stories are fiction, they are deeply rooted in reality, and the reality that civilians in a war experience is sometimes a lot more horrifying and unimaginable than fiction.

“With fiction, too, the reader doesn’t have to understand the history or back-

ground of a conflict to identify with the writer’s feelings and emotions,” says Alareer, 35.

The idea for the book came after what Alareer calls “the 23 days of continuous killing and misinformation” of Operation Cast Lead, a military offensive launched in the Gaza Strip by the Israelis between Dec 27, 2008, and Jan 18, 2009.

After completing his MAA in Comparative Literature in London, Alareer had returned to Gaza, his birthplace, in 2007 to teach creative writing. He says he will never forget the day

Operation Cast Lead began, when airplanes began the attack.

“Attacks blazed through homes and killed civilians, tanks destroyed entire villages. Everything that moved was shot at, and it made you realise that there isn’t such a thing as being in the right or wrong place or right or wrong time, because anyone could be a target.

“And 23 days later, when we could finally emerge from our homes, those of us whose homes were still standing, that was when it dawned on me, the extent of destruction and suffering and

the number of casualties.”

When some semblance of normality eventually returned, Alareer returned to teaching his creative writing course. While he used mostly works by Shakespeare and Charles Dickens, he also included Palestinian fiction whenever he could. And that’s when the idea to gather stories formed.

“I started asking my students to write about what they had endured and bear witness to the anguish the operation had caused. Writing is itself a testimony, a memory that outlives any human experience, and I truly believe we have an obligation to communicate with the outside world how we coped with the loss and survived on hope,” Alareer explains.

Some of his students initially resisted the task but he coaxed and encouraged them, believing they could become voices of their generation, and that such storytelling is a creative act of resistance to the chaos that reigns in his homeland.

Yousef Aljamal, who contributed the story entitled *Omar X*, worked closely with Alareer to recreate a story based on Aljamal’s experience. “Yousef related to me that his elder brother Omar was shot dead during a clash with Israeli soldiers and his phone later showed that he had tried contacting the family just before he was killed. So I wanted Yousef to retrace and imagine the moments leading up to his brother’s death and what might have gone through his mind as he attempted to contact his family.

“The outcome is a compelling read – you can feel the pain, remorse and suffering,” says Alareer.

“This is why story-telling is important for Palestinians, as it opens up a new scope for ourselves and others.”

Apart from his students’ works, almost 100 submissions came in when Alareer made a public announcement about wanting to compile stories of Gaza into a book.

Then came the difficult task of narrowing the list down to the final 23 stories – 23 to match the 23 days of Operation Cast Lead. It took him almost

a year to finish editing the book.

Though some of the contributors were only 17 or 18 when they wrote their stories, Alareer says the level of maturity is profound, probably due in part to the difficult situations that shaped these young people’s minds.

“Most of the stories documented are about pure human experiences, bereft of politics and ideologies.

“We wanted a variety of themes so you’ll find content not just about violence and the massacres but also about perseverance and steadfastness in times of pain and trauma, stories about Jerusalem and the Israelis’ Separation Wall constructed on confiscated lands in the occupied West Bank as well as stories about ordinary mothers, fathers and the elderly.

“There are also stories that delve into our own Palestinians’ flaws, the customs and leadership for instance, our ills and evils we must fight against, internal conflicts, struggle and discrimination that are severely self-critical.”

Alareer hopes that these stories will prompt calls for change and that “we could collectively learn to become better human beings” in future.

In the meantime, he worries about what will happen to his family: “To be away from my family now, it’s tough, as I worry about them all the time. My daughter’s school had been attacked twice in the past so we’ve had to relocate her further away for classes.”

But Alareer remains hopeful. “What many people hold on to is a belief in the future, that as history has shown, all occupations, like this one too, will come to an end,” he asserts.

■ *Gaza Writes Back: Short Stories From Young Writers In Gaza, Palestine* (Just World Books, 208 pages) is available at major bookstores in Malaysia. A Bahasa Malaysia translation of the book is scheduled to be released next month.



iSnap me
for a video of a talk by one of the young women who contributed to *Gaza Writes Back*

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